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ABSTRACT

With increasing numbers of nontraditional students (25 years or older) enrolling in college classes, it is important for educators to understand how these students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness may differ from those of the more traditional university population. To discover the categories traditional and nontraditional students use in their evaluation of teachers, 22 traditional and 13 nontraditional students from required communication courses were asked to describe the best teacher they ever had. Content analysis of the descriptions was based on a classification system placing constructs in one of four mutually exclusive categories: psychological, teacher role, teacher student interaction, and other. Analysis revealed that nontraditional students placed more emphasis on personality and interaction dimensions and less importance on role related behaviors than did younger students. Faculty need to be informed of the different needs and expectations of the changing student population. By giving prompt, specific, and descriptive rather than evaluative feedback, teachers can help satisfy this nontraditional group's urgent need to define themselves as potentially successful students. (MM)

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THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING EFFECTIVENSS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF TRADITIONAL AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Abstract

Teaching effectiveness has long been a subject of interest to scholars. While previous investigations have noted clear relationships between teacher behavior and student interpretations, they share a troublesome fundamental characteristic: they study teaching effectiveness by examining the teacher. This traditional research approach assumes that the evaluations that students make of teaching effectiveness is teacher-determined rather than student-determined. Hence, effectiveness of teachers is thought to be created primarily by variations of teacher appearance, disclosure, and style, somewhat independent of differences in the students. To this time, investigations of student evaluations of teachers have not provided an understanding of the thought processes that students use as they evaluate classroom teachers. Moreover, most analyses of student responses are based on the assumption that all students have similar needs, expectations, and perceptions of their instructors.

Student demographics are changing with dramatic increases in the numbers of nontraditional students. Postsecondary learners are no longer limited to traditional 18-year-old resident students. The Carnegie Council projects a 23% decline in the numbers of 18-to-24 year-old students. These changes in enrollment affect teaching and the evaluation of teaching. This study was designed to discover what categories traditional and nontraditional students adopt in their evaluation of teachers. Extensive differences are reported and the social-psychological and practical implications of these differences are identified.

Teaching effectiveness has long been a subject of interest to scholars. Various instruments have been used to gather student assessments of their teachers. Most of these measures have focused on teacher behaviors which influence student evaluations of the teacher's effectiveness (Andersen, 1979; Elliot, 1979). Much recent communication research has identified specific teacher communicative behaviors that affect student comprehension and evaluation, such as self-disclosure (Scott & Nussbaum, 1981) and communicator style (Norton, 1977). While these investigations have noted clear relationships between teacher behaviors and student interpretations, they share an even more basic characteristic: they study teaching effectiveness by examining the teacher.

This traditional research approach assumes that the evaluation that students make of teaching effectiveness is primarily teacher-determined rather than student-determined. Hence, effectiveness of teachers is thought to be created primarily by variations in teacher appearance, disclosure, and style, somewhat independent of differences in the students. To this time, investigations of student evaluations of teachers have not provided an understanding of the thought processes that students use as they evaluate classroom teachers.

Since much theory and research in person perception emphasizes the powerful role of the thought processes which influence the perception process, that a priority in the investigation of teaching effectiveness must be a clearer understanding of the cognitive processes by which students evaluate their teachers. Many researchers have used more traditional, teacher-centered

approaches, but few have examined the role of the cognitive processes of the learners.

Postsecondary learners are no longer limited to traditional 18-year-old resident students. Carnegie Council projects a 23% decline in the number of 18-to-24 year-old students by 1997 (pp. 37, 42, 43). At the same time that the numbers of traditional students are declining, Carnegie Council projects a 50% increase in postsecondary students twenty-two years or older and an 85% increase in nonresidential students (p. 54). The trend is already apparent as reported by the U.S. Bureau of the Census which notes that from 1974-79, parttime enrollment figures for persons aged thirty-five and older increased 43.8%. At one urban campus of a midwestern state university during the fall 1981 semester, students over the age of twenty-five comprised 41% of the total student population. This nonresidential campus located in a metropolitan area presently demonstrates the profile of postsecondary enrollments projected for colleges and universitites for the coming decades. Clearly, student demographics are changing with dramatic increases in the numbers of nontraditional students.

The changes in enrollment affect teaching. In this study nontraditional students were those who were 25 years or older, who maintained current, extensive non-college responsibilities and who had not been enrolled in college for at least three years. This definition is consistent with that adopted by other researchers (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981) Nontraditional students, those who are older, often married, often employed, and generally nonresidential, enter the classrooms with different

expectations, capabilities, and needs than their 18-year-old counterparts. Apparent differences exist in the expectations that nontraditional students have for sociability behaviors in classroom teachers as compared with younger students (Switzer, 1981). Another apparent difference suggests that fear of failure is a more powerful motivator for older students than for younger ones (Switzer, 1981). Current research comparing traditional with nontraditional students makes it reasonable to predict that some differences are present in learners' expectations for classroom teaching. Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn (1981) urge compilation of data about these differences so that universities can better develop and implement programs appropriate to the changing student population (p. 3).

The general purpose of this particular study then was to investigate the judgmental dimensions that traditional and nontraditional students use in their perception and evaluation of teachers. Rather than adopting the standard measures based on stimulus-determined evaluative responses, this investigation was based on a methodology consistent with George A. Kelly's Personal Construct Theory. Kelly's formulation has been widely applied and tested in the interpersonal domain (Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979; Delia, Clark, & Switzer, 1979; Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971) and to a lesser extent in the political domain (Freeman, 1980; Freeman & Weaver, 1981; Swanson, 1982). Its applicability to the study of classroom teaching effectiveness is yet to be examined.

In order to understand how a person interprets or evaluates

activities, one needs to identify the mental constructs which guide and organize the person's perceptual processes. Since research gathers subjective dimensions of individual judgments, traditional research methods do not seem appropriate. The assumptions undergirding standard "objective" measures contradict the understanding of persons as active perceivers of data. Instead, application of the student-oriented approach to teaching effectiveness would, more fittingly, be based on naturalistic methods such as open-ended surveys, self-reports of perceivers, and generation of questions by subjects. In the perspective offered by Kelly, this investigation continued a research tradition in a new context by asking the basic question: what are the major conceptual dimensions used by traditional and nontraditional students in their evaluations of teachers?

This study was designed to discover what evaluative categories traditional and nontraditional students adopt in their evaluation of teachers. Traditional techniques of having students respond to investigator-generated lists of traits was avoided because of the danger inherent in that approach, the masking of possibly important subject-generated dimensions by the procedure itself. That is, this study attempted to formulate broad questions, questions for which the responses might not be readily apparent to the researchers. Limitations of research based on investigator-generated questionnaires and inventories have been noted by David L. Swanson (1973) in a paper on constructivism as an approach suitable for political research. Swanson wrote, "We simply do not know whether the discriminations we find in survey and

experimental data reflect meaningful judgments made by voters or are artifacts of our methods" (p. 4). The present research was designed to identify dimensions which are important to the subjects themselves.

Open-ended statements are especially suited to this type of inquiry. Cicourel (1964) observed that ". . . the questionnaire with fixed-choice response categories precludes the possibility of obtaining unanticipated definitions of the situation which reveal the subject's private thoughts and feelings" (p. 105). Whether open-ended statements can generate constructs suitable for analysis was a question asked by Freeman (1976). In his study of voter assessment of political candidates, Freeman compared the constructs generated by free description of political figures with those generated by the standard Political Construct Inventory (PCI). Using a content analysis system proposed by Duck (1973), Freeman found the free description measure to be more useful for "identifying content distribution of constructs" (p. 96). Moreover, the free description generated many more constructs than did other measures (p. 76). The major liability of the free description approach is the time-consuming nature of analysis required by it.

Despite the extensive time demands needed for analysis of the descriptions, the free description approach was adopted as the one most suited for answering the question: what conceptual dimensions do students employ in evaluating their teacher?

Subjects. Subjects in this study were 35 undergraduates in required communication courses at a mid-sized Midwestern state

university and at a provate liberal arts college. Subjects included both "traditional" (n=22) and "nontraditional" (n=13) students.

Instrument. The basic data-gathering device for this investigation was the "Free Description of An Effective Teacher." In the free description instrument, students were asked to write down the name of "the best teacher I ever had." After identifying that teacher, subjects were asked to describe that teacher as completely as possible. These descriptions provided verbalized conceptual dimensions used by the subjects in their perceptions of the actual teachers whom they considered to be effective.

Analysis. In order to analyze the conceptual dimensions which students used in their descriptions of effective teachers, content analysis based on a construct classification system developed by Duck (1973, pp. 98-99) was completed. Duck developed the coding system for identifying changes in interpersonal constructs in the course of the development of a relationship. Duck's system places constructs in one of four mutually exclusive categories: psychological (e.g. character, personality, or otherwise primarily dispositional attributes); role (habitual activities or role-relevant beliefs); interaction (communication behaviors such as voice and gestures); and other (miscellaneous attributes that do not fit in any of the other three categories)(p. 84). Constructs from the descriptions were divided into these content categories by coders using Duck's system.

Findings. The reliability of coder-coder agreement in their placement of constructs into Duck's four categories was moderately

high with a rate of agreement of 94.5% for nontraditional students and 80.1% for traditional students.

The relative distribution of the constructs into Duck's categories is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE ONE

Relative Distribution of Constructs
Content Categories

Measuring Instrument	n	Psychological	Role	Interaction	Other
Free Description of Teacher by Traditional Students	22	31/87	50/87	5/87	1/87
		35.63%	57.47%	5.74%	1.14%
Free Description of Teacher by Nontraditional Students	13	35/69	24/69	6/69	4/69
		50.72%	34.78%	8.69%	5.79%

These distributions contrast with studies done on interpersonal relationships (Duck, p.99) in which the perceivers used many more personality/psychological constructs (64%) than role constructs

(24%). The distributions may be compared also to the political domain which elicited mean proportions of 35% personality/ psychological constructs, 49% role constructs, 12% interaction constructs, and 4% other (Freeman, p. 100, Table 5).

While role constructs play a minor role in interpersonal perception (24%), they play a much larger role in voter assessment of political figures (49%). In this study, role constructs were identified in 41% of the descriptions of all students combined.

Several differences also are apparent in the comparison of traditional and nontraditional students. In the category of role constructs, those behaviors which relate directly to the teacher's formal role as instructor, nontraditional students' references to role constructs constituted 34.8% of the total description while traditional students included role behaviors as 57.4% of the total description. Responses from the nontraditional students included role descriptors such as: "well-prepared," "relevant examples for support," "clear expectations for student performance," "well-read," "fair-grading," "knew the current material," "challenges your mind," and "gave lectures that had an organized, logical outline." In the same category, traditional students provided descriptors such as: "motivated the student to critically analyze the material," "knowledgable," "gave praise for a job well-done," "had no strict formal class procedures," and "cared about your grade." Despite similarities in the behaviors described by both sets of students, the proportion of attributes that fit in the role construct category differed by 23% with nontraditional students giving less importance to specific role-

related behaviors.

Another area in which traditional and nontraditional students differed in the proportions of responses related to a particular category of behaviors was the interaction construct. Duck describes the interaction category as one which includes behaviors about how persons actually share information with one another. Included in this category are behaviors such as gestures, voice, and cues about the direction of the exchange. Traditional students employed 5.7% interaction constructs, compared to the 8.6% used by the nontraditional students. Representative descriptors by traditional students in this category were: "soft-spoken," "good speaker," "presents material enthusiastically," and "was an interesting speaker." Nontraditional students also described interaction behaviors: "knew all his people by name," "used non-sexist language," "loud voice," "very articulate," and "forceful delivery."

In the category of psychological constructs, nontraditional students employed about 13% more references to personality variables (50.7%) than did the traditional students (35.6%). Behaviors included in this category by traditional students were "enthusiastic," "outgoing," "concerned," "always cheerful," "patient," and "understanding." Nontraditional students noted behaviors such as "dynamic personality," "talented," and "enjoyed her work."

As far as we can determine differences in perceptions of teachers by traditional and nontraditional students have not been studied before: therefore, the differences which have emerged

deserve consideration. On the basis of this limited sampling, the younger traditional students appear to have more expectations that their teachers behave in ways consistent with the formal role of teacher. In fact, in those teachers whom they most respect, they describe nearly 60% of the positive behaviors as those related to the teaching role. If this sampling is representative, then faculty who exhibit abundant role-related behaviors may not be evaluated as positively by nontraditional students as by the traditional ones. Conversely, nontraditional students consider personality characteristics like "friendliness" to be much more important in teachers than do their traditional counterparts. The different expectations of teaching effectiveness held by traditional and nontraditional learners have significant implications for the evaluation of teaching effectivenss and for the acquisition and maintenance of particular student support services in colleges. These implications deserve prompt attention since reliable projections indicate that college populations will show dramatic increases in the numbers of nontraditional learners.

The evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

Current measures of teaching effectiveness must be assessed to determine if they are responsive to the dimensions of judgments used by traditional and nontraditional students. Initial investigations suggest that modifications are needed. Faculty need to be informed of the differing needs and expectations of the changing populations of their classes.

The social-emotional needs of nontraditional students.

Many re-entering nontraditional students report that they feel they have for a long time been dismissing their own needs for the needs of others, usually spouses and children. They report that there has been limited positive, external feedback about their nonstudent behaviors and, of course, no information about their potential as students. In part, this accounts for their regular expressions of attention to sociability behaviors of teachers. Regular feedback about the student's performance provides the much needed encouragement and subject-related data these students seek. The most effective feedback is that which is prompt, specific, descriptive rather than evaluative, and focused on modifiable behaviors. Nontraditional students often bring extensive nonclassroom experience to classrooms. Some, for example, have extensive experience in management, time management, listening, and similar skill areas. These skills have been developed in a rich variety of roles, ranging from fulltime homemaker to community volunteer to paid employee. Effective teachers will make informed, substantive use of these experiences. Nontraditional students express urgency to define themselves as potentially successful students. They want very early in their student-experiences to have a sense of their own student-capabilities. Using their rich nonclassroom experiences as relevant, complimentary classroom references encourages most traditional learners and provides variety and insight for traditional learners. Nontraditional and traditional students welcome and

learn from classroom activities such as the use of successful previous nontraditional students' presentations as guest lecturers. Effective teachers adapt accordingly by modifying behavior and by understanding the differences in evaluation which they may receive from different student populations.

Summary

With increasing numbers of nontraditional students enrolling in college classes, it is important to study how their perceptions of teaching effectiveness may differ from the more traditional university population. This study identified several categories of constructs in which apparent differences emerged.

Nontraditional students placed more emphasis on personality and interaction dimensions than did traditional students . Traditional students, however, placed considerably more importance on role-related behaviors than did older students. This initial investigation of perceptual differences needs to be followed with additional studies with larger samples, more sophisticated category division in construct identification, and the development of an efficient, quantifiable measuring instrument which more accurately reflects those cognitive dimensions which students deem important.

At this early stage, the methodology used in this and one related study (Keller, 1982) offers possibilities for better understanding of one of the enduring questions about education: how do students evaluate their teachers? Projects such as this

will help clarify the nature of the contribution that a constructivist approach can make to the understanding of teaching effectiveness.

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